DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 193 716 CS 503 089

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TITLE Rehearsal as an Interpretive Technique.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 15p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acting; *Critical Reading; *Dramatics; Higher Education; *Oral Interpretation; *Scripts; Theater Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Directing (Theater); *Rehearsals (Theater)

ABSTRACT

Directors of plays can make rehearsals interpretively productive, but they must first reject directorial approaches such as beginning rehearsals without analyzing the script, projecting images of the play as it is read, and using the script merely to summarize meanings, static themes, morals, and nothing more. Making rehearsals interpretively productive requires prerehearsal interpretations that ask "why" over and over again until every perceivable moment of the script has been fully rationalized and reconciled with every other moment into a coherent "action to be communicated," not merely an action to be executed before an audience. The most useful way for the director to formulate this action is in terms of final cause: that is, as a web of understandings of the communicative job to be done, of the impact performance that they should have on the audience moment by moment. During rehearsal, this sketchy cognitive structure of how the play should be communicated should be tested, revised, and fleshed out. In rehearsal, the final test of a script is "apprehensive rightness"--an intuitive realization that the show does, indeed, make sense, is fully coherent, and will affect the audience in a powerful and meaningful way. (RL)

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1978

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REHEARSAL AS AN INTERPRETIVE TECHNIQUE

For several years, I've been among the noisiest of those arguing for extensive and meticulous interpretive labor by the director before he takes a show into rehearsal. My own rule of thumb is one year of regular script study before production. This usually seems too short. If the script is good, it's complex and subtle and its patterns aren't clear on the face of the script; they have to be teased out with a range of interpretive techniques of equal complexity and subtlety. I do this work carefully, yet I've never felt confident, as that first rehearsal began, that I had the thing canned, that I could fairly say "I understand this script fully and surely."

It's even worse: you will always find me sitting in the auditorium after the final performance of any play I've directed, muttering to myself, "Now I see how it works! Now I'm ready to

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direct this show!" Strangely, this happens to me even after the final performance of shows I've directed three times. No doubt there are many important things to be learned about a script from both rehearsals and performances, things which simply won't be learned before rehearsal, even by the best of readers. Particularly, there is a kind of evidence which rehearsal and performance can yield which no other approach provides. I'm ready now to argue that no one should claim a full and reliable understanding of a playscript until he has directed it. Today I'll share a few thoughts about what rehearsal, specifically, can do for our understanding and what we must do to make it interpretively productive.

What Not to Do:

First, I want to reject three directorial approaches which seem to me generally unproductive and which make it unlikely that rehearsal will enhance understanding:

1) The "let's-just-go-into-rehearsal-and-find-out-what-this-show-is-all-about" approach: this is our most popular approach, I'm afraid, probably because most of us don't know much about interpretation or because we find it hard to discipline ourselves to the months of drudgery a careful study of the script requires. A smaller number of directors sincerely believe that this is a more honest, organic approach. I think it's disastrous. There are many arguments against it. Here are three:

   a) It leads to "directing for excitement" or "believability", tinkering with scenes until they "look good" or "keep us interested," or, as we all like to say, until they "work". Unfortunately, there are lots of ways to mistakenly judge

that a scene is working. The one really necessary standard, appropriate communicative impact (an idea which I'll develop later) is just not the kind of standard which can be comprehended in rehearsal. In rehearsal we can judge and refine our understanding of the appropriate impact, we can judge our success in meeting this standard, but we can't trust ourselves to develop the communication goals there. Excitement, like entertainment, is not a goal. It is a means, not an end. Without it, we probably won't reach our goal, but many disastrous productions are exciting, entertaining, and believable scene-by-scene. If we don't begin rehearsal with a thorough but tentative grasp of the communication pattern of the script, we'll probably never find it and we'll end up with a hyped-but-hollow show.

b) Several subtle, time-consuming, and crucial ways of examining a script just can't be accomplished in rehearsal and are not likely to be done in the office once the burden of rehearsal is on us. I'm thinking of such things as careful linguistic style analyses, image and icon studies, etcetera. If we skip these and lean wholly on rehearsal insights, we'll miss the bulk of what can be done to reveal the greatest subtleties of the playwright's strategy.

c) The uniqueness of each actor and his personal imaginative and emotional needs will have undue impact on the production if the basic goals are not tentatively established in advance. No doubt the actor can teach us much about the script, but he will not encourage us to take the larger view and much of

our most important work will seem dull and irrelevant to him. So, too, with the designers.

For these reasons, and others, I reject this technique. Not many will argue with me on this one, I expect. It's a bit like nose-picking: most uf us do it but not many are willing to publically advocate it.

2) The "theatre of the mind" or "regiebuch" approach: I'll get a lot more argument here. These are two variations on a theme which is popular in our books on directing and in our classes. They both have enormous flaws which make me reject them. I'd like to hold forth on that topic at length but I must be content to list a few of the most glaring problems:

In both, there is confusion of interpretation with the planning of the mise-en-scene. They encourage the director to "see" the play as he reads it. To bring it to life before his mind's eyes and ears. They encourage him to visualize a full performance in advance and to try to recreate his vision in rehearsal. The number of misunderstandings of both interpretation and staging implied here is amazing. Interpretation does not yield a complete explanation or image of performance. It cannot. Scripts do not describe performances, they imply certain things which must be communicated and many things which may not reasonably be communicated (what I call Parameters and Tolerance). But in between the Parameters and the Limits of Tolerance there is an enormous area of Lattitude, room in which creative, not interpretative, choices may be made. To combine the interpretive work with the creative work

leads to great confusion and, almost surely, creative impulses will win out, will subvert careful interpretation.

To visualize a production fully before rehearsal, to chart every move and hear every vocal inflection in advance is foolhardy. To "see" the man Hamlet in the mind's eye and then to go to tryouts looking for him is self-defeating. What we need to know of Hamlet is exactly what he must achieve with the audience in order for the play to do its work. In this case, certain qualities of mind are everything and appearance almost nothing. To visualize a production fully in advance mis-comprehends the nature of theatre art in which the material (the actors' bodies and voices, etc.) is unpredictable, in both fortunate and unfortunate ways. Rehearsal should be our time to work with actors, to find in them the best of all ways of fulfilling the Parameters of the script while staying within its Tolerance.

To reach final conclusions about staging in advance of rehearsal implies that a director may reasonably be sure of his understanding of the script before rehearsal and this just isn't so.

The choice we must make is not whether to prepare in advance or to wing it in rehearsal. It is subtler: we must carefully distinguish those things which can most effectively be done in advance from those which can most effectively be done in rehearsal. This means we choose to construct in advance a full but tentative rationalization of the script (those Parameters and Tolerances) in terms of our communicative obligations; we encroach on our Lattitude area in advance only

so far as is necessary to manage the fundamental scenic, costume, and traffic problems, but we jealously guard the bulk of the Lattitude decisions until rehearsal where we can work experimentally on them for two reasons: our advance interpretive work must be put to the test of physical embodiment on the stage before we dare accept it, and we want to involve the actors in the creative task of embodiment because we want to find the best of all possible ways. Which of us dares claim that he can do all this, as well as it can be done, by himself and in advance of rehearsal?

For me, these approaches conjure up two images: the director with his full image of the show-in-the-mind and the other with his thirteen regiebuchs seem to me much like morticians trying to patch up a decaying corpse to look like something it cannot be: a living creature. And sometimes I see them as Gene Wilderian Dr. Frankensteins trying desperately to animate a patchwork hulk.

3) The "hyper-cognitive" or "English department" approach: I won't take long with this one because most of us already see the problem. I'm referring to the director who sees interpretation as the search for summary meanings, for static themes, morals, ideas, etc., and nothing more. These findings can be useful, as a small part of our understanding but not as the end product, primarily because they tell us nothing that is really useful in rehearsal. They fail to see that, though plays have meanings, they are not reducible to formulated, generalized meanings. They fail to notice that the tingle in the audience's spine, the sudden intake of breath, the awareness, at precisely the

right moment, that this character is lying, and so on almost endlessly, is meaning in a more fundamental sense than any broad generalized formulations we can make. These details of audience experience <u>are</u> the show, <u>are</u> the meaning; formulations are <u>about</u> the show, <u>about</u> its meaning. Until we have grasped that fundamental pattern of audience experience required by the script (however tentatively) we are not ready to begin rehearsal. I can't forget one of the most fascinating and sad directors I ever knew. He talked the greatest show you've ever heard. He charged his actors and designers up totally. When he finished his opening speech, they <u>knew</u> this would be the greatest show ever seen. But I think he never directed a show that was even adequate. His understandings were so removed from the nitty-gritty communicative foundation of the script and his rehearsal eye so overwhelmed by his expectations that what he dreamed never appeared on the stage. So it is, usually, with the hyper-cognitive director.

But enough of rejection. I've suggested much of what I have to say about what may or should be done to make our advance interpretive work effective and to keep it from shutting the door to even subtler, more reliable work in rehearsal. Now I'd like to draw these positive ideas together a bit more systematically.

<u>Basic Problems of Interpretation</u>:

Interpretation is not easy. It takes a lot of time, very advanced analytic skills, and a fully developed ability to synthesize, to see <u>patterns of significance</u>. It takes enormous self-discipline

to carry out the drudgery of the analytic work and to resist the temptation to project our own preferred meanings into the script. It won't do to simply read the script, thoughtfully, several times; we must study it: dismantle it, put it to test after test, view it from every perspective, through every frame of reference we can discover. It is difficult because of these fundamental problems:

- Scripts are AMBIGUOUS, both verbally and behaviorally. The ambiguity of each word, each behavior can only be reduced when that word or act is seen as a functional moment in a coherent pattern of significance which comprises the whole script.
- Scripts are ELIPTICAL. They are documents for the specialist, written in a kind of shorthand with most of the writer-to-director communication taken for granted.
- Scripts spring from other MATRICES (other worlds, other minds) in which signification systems and life itself are different. This problem is not limited to scripts from Greek and Elizabethan matrices. The Tennessee Williams universe, the Arthur Miller universe, the world of David Rabe all are alien to most of us, although we don't usually notice it. If you didn't write the script, you've got a matrix problem when you read it.
- Scripts are loaded with UNSPOKEN CONTENT. Much of the content of the writer-to-audience communication seems so obvious to the author that it is simply omitted. But nothing is really obvious and the farther we are from the author's matrix, the less of the unspoken content we can perceive.
- Scripts are fundamentally IRONIC. They usually don't mean what they initially seem to mean. We're caught in a paradox:

we can't confidently know what anything means until we know what everything means...and vice versa.

- And finally, each author, each script has its own PRIVATE LANGUAGE (verbal and behavioral) and its own STRATEGY. We have to learn how the author writes before we can understand what he has written.

There are more problems, but these seem basic to me.

Any task so complex and problem-ridden presents us with two temptations: either to give up and just wing it or to trust our first understandings, to cling desperately to them, blinding ourselves to contradictory evidence and to the actual impact of our understanding on production. We must find ways to resist these temptations, to internalize a belief in the absolute necessity of the interpretive work and a healthy suspicion of all our conclusions.

Special Problems of Pre-rehearsal Interpretation:

In addition to the problems cited above, there are these:

- The non-verbal factors in a play (i.e. the scenery, light, body sizes/shapes, non-verbal sounds, non-speaking characters, props, etc., are very important, yet very difficult to comprehend when studying the script. Scripts encourage us to see plays as being made of words. Scripts are, but plays aren't. Plays are made of things and behaviors. Despite all the assertions to the contrary in drama texts written by professors of English, plays are predominantly non-verbal. Obviously, the director must learn to anticipate the impact of these factors, must learn to hold them constantly in attention, must include them in his synthesizing work. But I doubt that anyone ever learns to do this adequately. This is one of the strongest arguments for holding all understandings

tentatively, until rehearsal has clarified the impact of the non-verbal. We must always be ready to reconceive the whole show as this new evidence requires. (I'm thinking now of the Stratford Festival's pitiful production of Uncle Vanya which I saw recently. The director and designer seem completely to have missed Chekov's non-verbal strategy, to have simply omitted it from their calculations. The result was a performance which seemed to have almost nothing to do with Chekov's script.)

- The biggest problem of all is a very bothersome one and not at all easy to explain or to cope with. It undermines not only script interpretation but all human efforts to comprehend and explain experience. Evolution has separated us from most of the other animals by giving us a capacity for consciousness, for self-reflexive awareness of some of our own mental processes, for the objectifying of our experience and our possible experience. The negative side of this is that the coming of consciousness involved a trade-off: we gave up most of our instinct, which is to say most of our share in the evolved wisdom of our species; we have to figure it out for ourselves, to learn how to use our mental and physical equipment, what to want and how to live. In return, we get many things, above all flexibility, adaptability, and this objectifying capacity which allows us, sometimes, to anticipate the results of our possible behaviors without having to go through the hard experience, and, above all, to grasp implications. We have invented systems (like grammar and logic) which embody socially validated thought structures so that we are somewhat relieved of the burden of

empirical evidence and may rely, instead, on the regularity and coherence of our conscious structures. This is a wonderful and difficult new system of mental operation. It can do amazing things. But it is currently at about the point in its development, in its finesse, that color television was in 1950. It works, sometimes, sort of, enough to make it worth having, but it causes as many problems as it solves. Most human suffering is possible only because we are conscious and self-programming.

All conscious thought is presented to us in words. We tinker with the words, fitting them into grammatical and logical patterns in the hope that, when the words fit together, according to these validated patterns, then our thinking makes sense and has some valid relationship to the reality it refers to. But words never capture reality. Word patterns (cognitive structures) evoke subjective images and memories of reality and simulate our beliefs about reality, but they are not the reality to which they refer and our simulations of reality are only proximate. We may be, often are, delighted and convinced by the tidy lines of reasoning and category systems we devise, only to discover that reality won't conform to our structures. Though consciousness helps us to anticipate the future, it gives no guarantees. The history of philosophy is littered with the cast off remains of theories which sounded completely convincing to their authors and to generations of disciples but which failed to meet the test of reality, i.e. did not do what all theories mean to do, to explain what is in such a way that our choice-making is more efficient. So with dramatic theory generally and with thousands of theories of specific scripts.

The director's understanding, his explanation to himself of the script, is, after all, a theory. It is a good theory when it leads him to efficient decisions about the shaping of performance. The performance is good when the actual audience experience of the play approximates the experience described by the script-theory and implied by the director's staging-theory. These theories, as they stand before performance, are no more reliable than a geologist's theory of the material structure of the planet Venus. Until we walk on the planet and look carefully at it, we won't know whether the theory really makes sense.

Theories, by the way, are never true or false. Because they are merely simulations of reality, they can be no more than tenable or untenable (depending on the comprehensiveness and coherence of the argument) and either useful or trivial. A theory of a script (an interpretation, an understanding) is tenable and useful when it makes sense of the script as a whole, when it fully accounts for the script. The best interpretation is the one which meets these standards of sense-making and accountability in the way which interests us most and tells us most about what we must achieve in the theatre, moment by moment. (Not how to achieve it, but what to achieve.)

So, no matter how brilliant our analyses, our syntheses, our explanations, they can never be more than hypothetical, tentative understandings to be tested in rehearsal and, ultimately, in performance. We can't do without them, but we may not trust them.

What to Do Before Rehearsal:

Pre-rehearsal interpretation asks "WHY??" again and again until every perceivable moment of the script has been fully rationalized and reconciled with every other moment into a coherent Action to be communicated. (Let me repeat that: "an Action to be communicated", not some activities to be executed. This Action is a Psychic Event in the hypothetical audience mind, not some Physical Processes.)

The most useful way for the director to formulate this Action is in terms of Final Cause: that is, as a web of understandings of the communicative job to be done, of the impact performance should have on the audience moment by moment, the cognitive impact, the affective impact, and the sensory impact, both immediate and long-term. Not what the audience should see and hear, literally, but how they should be affected.

What to Do In Rehearsal:

Rehearsal (as an interpretive technique) has the function of testing this sketchy cognitive structure, revising it, and fleshing it out. The final test of our understanding can come only with performance.

In rehearsal, the final test is apprehensive rightness, that is, an intuitive or "gut" realization that the show does, indeed, make sense, is fully coherent, does affect us in a powerful and meaningful way. This casting off of our cognitive approach, our thoughts about the show, and submission to felt experience of the show as an Action is dangerous but necessary.

Intuition is not a direct pipeline to guaranteed knowledge. It is simply pre-conscious mental processing. It has the advantage that it is much faster and more complex; it can process more information more subtley; it is the mode in which the audience will operate. But it is only as good as it has been conditioned to be; it includes all our best and worst mental habits. It can be trusted only by those who have internalized the ideas of accountability, coherence, intelligibility, relevance, and Final Cause. By conditioning ourselves to respond habitually in these ways, we prepare ourselves to use rehearsal as the final and crucial stage in our interpretive work. When we know our assignment, our communicative responsibility, and free ourselves from looser standards of "rightness" in performance, we will serve the script, the audience, and ourselves better.